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ABSTRACT

Research and reviews of college introductory sociology textbooks reveal that most do not accurately reflect the diversity of views and perspectives in sociology and do not accurately convey the research-based knowledge of the discipline. Content analysis of textbooks published in the last 20 years indicates that most textbooks are comprehensive, structure has changed little, content is eclectic, divergent theoretical perspectives are rarely explored, and research findings and recent scholarly contributions are rarely incorporated. An analysis of textbook reviews reveals that texts are criticized for lacking depth, neglecting contemporary macro-level societal phenomena in favor of student interest and readability, omitting summaries and syntheses of research, inadequately portraying how sociologists actually work, and not acknowledging controversy among sociologists or ambiguity in the knowledge base. Failure of excellence in textbooks is attributable to economic concerns of publishers; the existence of mass lecture sessions, which is related to the use of comprehensive texts; and constraints on authors inherent in the publication of a manuscript. The solution is for university sociology departments to publish their own textbooks. Faculty responsible for the course could write a text, receiving a reduced teaching load or summer support. Revenue from sales could be used for further support of authors or departmental programs. (KC)

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# THE FAILURE OF EXCELLENCE IN TEXTS

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# THE FAILURE OF EXCELLENCE IN TEXTS

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Sociologists have been concerned with textbooks as a professional responsibility and as a topic for scholarly study. Somewhere between one-half and three-quarter million students take introductory level courses in sociology each year. The textbook is a major pedagogical tool in most of these courses, providing students with their first glimpse of the discipline. The experiences that students have in first courses undoubtedly influence other academic decisions that shape enrollments, majors and the strength of a discipline. Experiences in the first course can also have long-term consequences when former students become policy-makers who can help or hurt a discipline. An upper level administrator at my university, recounting undergraduate experiences to a student organization, remarked that some first year courses, like sociology, were found to be worthless.

As a scholarly interest, the political-economy of textbooks is an increasingly attractive topic of study from the point of view of corporate involvement in academic life and the gate-keeping role of textbooks. The dominance of particular theoretical views in sociology, and the neglect of emerging divergent views, can be attributed in part to the "backward-looking" orientation of textbooks.

I shall try to do several things in this paper in the hope of stimulating a professional or scholarly interest in textbooks. First, a brief review of current research on sociology textbooks. Second, an examination of the conditions that contribute to the failure of excellence in textbooks. And third, the obligatory call for change in current practices of textbook production and use.

Deficiencies: Discipline and User Views

Systematic examination of the content of textbooks has usually been conducted from the point of view of the knowledge-base of the discipline. The discipline is viewed as having different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, noteworthy historical and contemporary figures, and influential, high quality books and articles that have shaped the discipline. The content of textbooks is measured against some assumed knowledge-base of the discipline and found to be wanting or exemplary.

Content analysis of samples of textbooks published in the last twenty-odd years reveals the following (Bain, 1962; Hedley and Taveggia, 1977; Oromaner, 1968; Perrucci, 1980; Reichlein, 1979; Spanier and Stump, 1978).

(1) Most textbooks, especially those published recently, are "big books" (averaging 18 chapters) attempting to be comprehensive in their coverage of sub-areas of the discipline.

(2) The structure of textbooks, in terms of chapter coverage, has changed very little in the last twenty years. New or unconventional chapters ("Uses of Sociology," "International Relations") appear infrequently.

(3) Textbooks are predominantly eclectic, containing a string of chapters without a dominant theoretical orientation that integrates, unifies, or draws together material across chapters.

(4) Recent texts (published since 1973) provide coverage of divergent theoretical perspectives (structural-functionalism; conflict; symbolic interaction), but these perspectives are rarely carried beyond the opening chapters in a consistent and systematic fashion.[1] Recent texts also provide more space for discussion of ethical-value issues in sociology, but there is insufficient evidence of an established pattern of such topics becoming standard content in almost all books.

(5) Textbooks do a poor job of accurately representing existing research findings, and of incorporating the most recent scholarly contributions. Serious errors of commission and omission produce misleading information and inaccuracies in discussions of sociological research. Citations to research literature do not reflect the most up-to-date scholarly literature, and it is rare for books that have received the highest acclaim in the discipline (e.g., recipients of the McIver, Sorokin, C. Wright Mills awards) to be cited in texts.

Taken together, these findings indicate that most textbooks do a poor job of accurately reflecting the diversity of views and perspectives in sociology. Texts are also found wanting as vehicles for accurately conveying the research-based knowledge of the discipline.

The users of textbooks are the teachers who adopt books and the students who must use them in courses. What we know about how users feel about textbooks is based on reviews of books that appear in Contemporary Sociology. A selective reading of reviews in the last ten years indicates that reviewers are more likely to have the instructor and student in mind, rather than the discipline, when assessing a textbook. Reviews also reveal that instructors use a greater diversity of pedagogical approaches than could ever be satisfactorily combined in a single text. Consider, for example, the elements of the ideal text described by one user-reviewer.

"As most instructors know so well, selecting a text for the introductory course in sociology can be an excruciating task. Where is the one which presents the excitement of the sociological perspective, key ideas about life in contemporary society, an analysis of the way society hangs together, substantive areas of sociology, good cultural comparative data, is well written,

and is one which students don't find a chore to read? The search for such a text is frustrating, for it does not appear to exist." (Henslin, 19/4:82).

Against this background description of the ideal text, the comments of reviewers of texts reveal a set of dilemmas or incompatible options available to those who write and produce textbooks. Each option reflects critical comments of a text made by reviewers, or statements of preference about what they would like to see in a text.

Breadth or depth of coverage. The comprehensive text provides coverage of the main specialty areas of the discipline, but is often criticized for its lack of depth in treating topics. Particular chapters may be singled out for criticism for being totally inadequate in that they fail to reflect the work being done in the field. This will invariably happen in texts written by one or two authors because of the difficulty in keeping up-to-date on material needed for an eighteen chapter book.

Books attempting to cover a small number of topics in some depth, and those using a particular theoretical framework, are criticized because they give a one-sided, unbalanced view of the field. Providing depth often results in criticisms of "too difficult" or "the material will impress colleagues but will not be of interest to students."

Student-centered or discipline-centered. Student-centered texts attempt to use an explicit experiential or biographical approach in organizing the subject matter or in selecting substantive topics and illustrative material. Working with student experiences results in greater attention to such topics as family, community, schools, youth socialization, and the life cycle and a micro-level orientation that stresses interpersonal and intergroup processes. While this approach is often judged to be readable and interesting for students, it is criticized for neglecting contemporary macro-level societal phenomena

not yet experienced (e.g., political and economic power; social change: social movements). In addition, cross-cultural material cannot be easily incorporated into books that use an experiential framework as the pedagogical approach.

Discipline-centered texts make choices of structure and content consistent with the topics that engage the interests of professional sociologists. The sections of the American Sociological Association undoubtedly affect the inclusion of topics in texts. For example, the appearance and growth of the medical sociology section in the ASA is probably related to the appearance of such material in many recent texts. Discipline-centered texts are often given the "ho-hum" treatment by reviewers ("another academic textbook") and are "acclaimed" for being "competent", but boring.

Research product or research process. Some reviewers are looking for texts that summarize and synthesize existing knowledge developed by the discipline. They want to leave students with a firm set of empirical generalizations or propositions, perhaps in the hope that sociology will be seen as more scientific.

Other reviewers are clearly more skeptical about the quality of research-based knowledge developed by the discipline. Instead of summarizing the products of research, they look for texts that will emphasize the process by which sociological knowledge is developed. This implies more than simply a discussion of the formal steps in the research process, but extends to research as a social process. The result would be a more realistic portrayal of how sociologists actually work, including the compromises, errors, and disputes that can occur in any research effort.

A related concern of reviewers in this general area involves the prominence that should be given to methodology in a textbook, and whether it should

be handled as a separate chapter or infused throughout the book. Greater attention to methodology is called for by reviewers who emphasize discipline-centered texts that reflect the current state of sociological knowledge. On the other hand, those who prefer student-centered books rarely call for more emphasis on methodology.

Firm knowledge or open issues. A final point that divides reviewers concerns the emphasis that is given to controversy among sociologists, ambiguities in our knowledge base, and the open-ended nature of what we know and do as sociologists. Some reviewers are concerned about the tentative tone of some texts that state a position held by sociologists, or a sociological generalization, and then proceed to qualify it by expressing competing views or criticisms of the research findings. These reviewers feel that this approach tends to confuse students about what they do and do not know. Other reviewers feel that the tentative stance is an accurate reflection of our discipline and that students are more likely to be attracted to sociology because of its open-ended and controversial subject matter.

Clearly, user-reviewers prefer greater diversity of textbooks than the books currently available to them from publishers. The market is dominated by comprehensive, discipline-centered books that are felt to be bland, boring, or a dreary catalog of facts. Shorter books that present an author's personal feelings about sociology are viewed as better written and more student centered. Unfortunately, there is a growing tendency among reviewers to judge the student appeal of books not on grounds of content, but on the "features" that pre-occupy publishers: wide margins, two-color printing, attractive chapter beginnings, cartoons, and good white space (Brown, 1976). The acceptance of a publisher's standards, rather than an independent author's stance, may be responsible for the "me-too" character of most textbooks.

Why the failure of excellence in texts?

Measured against the standards of the discipline or the user-reviewer, introductory textbooks are found to be wanting. Why should it be so difficult for publishers and professors to produce at least a half-dozen textbooks that meet a standard of excellence? Why is it, given the scope and diversity of the textbook market, that there is not more experimentation with different types of books?

There are at least three conditions influencing the current state of textbooks in sociology. One involves the publishing industry. A second involves the role of teaching and the introductory course in American colleges and universities. The third involves the constraints on authors that are inherent in the production of a finished manuscript.

Much has been written about the changing character of publishing and how this has affected textbooks. The appearance of the conglomerate firm has apparently moved profit to center stage in decisions on texts (McGee, 1979). The logical outcome of preoccupation with profit is the "formula" text that is planned in accordance with market research, and written by professional writers who can meet a production schedule without unnecessary disputes over whether the book is good sociology (Kadushin, 1979).

We recognize that profit may not in fact be a real constraint in the production of textbooks (Coser, 1979). But while the accountants are sorting out the profit-loss figures for conglomerate publishers and independent houses, the important thing for the moment is that prevailing belief among editors and authors is that profit considerations determines what gets published. Editors are reluctant to take risks that might produce a first-rate text that no one adopts because it is too different. Certain chapters are "musts" for inclusion, even if they are not called for by the author's approach or framework.

And why are they "musts"? Because such chapters are found in the top six sellers in the textbook market! One often gets the feeling that it is not simply producing a non-seller that troubles editors, but producing a non-seller that is different from the competition. It is probably just the opposite for authors: they would much rather fail with a book that was recognized for its attempt to break the mold.

The second set of factors influencing textbook production are found within higher education. The existence of so-called mass lecture sections of introductory courses has undoubtedly been related to establishing the comprehensive "big" text (with manuals, test items, etc.) as the main teaching tool. It has probably also influenced publishers to think of the textbook market as uniform and knowable by market research techniques. Without such market concentration (or the perception of concentration) publishers would never invest in the production of "big" books, managed texts, or books aimed specifically at market segments (e.g., junior colleges).

Of course, mass lecture sections (enrollment of 200 or more is selected as the point where qualitative change takes place in how sociology can be taught) did not come about to suit the publishing industry. They occurred because they are low-cost instruction and they permitted faculty to have smaller teaching loads and devote more time to research and upper level instruction. While enjoying the gains of mass instruction, the loss is a down-grading of importance of teaching at this level. Rarely do a department's senior faculty or best teachers wind up teaching the first course. More likely, the course is "passed around" among the non-tenured, or, at best, a shared chore that faculty take when their turn comes.

Faculty without long-term commitments to a course are not likely to try to develop an integrated, coherent framework that draws together the diverse

topics of the discipline. If faculty did this in their own teaching they would probably be less attracted to the eclectic "big" books that provide a smattering without depth or development. More generally, neglect of teaching probably results in "inability to define the core material of our discipline" (Campbell, 1982: 131), certainly a central task of the introductory course and text. The specialization which most faculty are encouraged to develop by the academic reward system also results in relative ignorance of the total sociological enterprise.

Another belief shared by academics and editors that contributes to inadequate textbooks is that students today cannot read at college level. This belief is used to justify books with short sections, many headings, numerous illustrations and undemanding content. Consider the following instructions for writers of textbooks (cited Kadushin, 1979: 31-32).

> "This means short sentences and short words. The style should be similarly terse. Students will not follow long explanations, nor will they participate in exercises in reasoning. They simply want to be told the information as clearly and quickly as possible.... You cannot expect them to be interested in the material itself.... It will not occur to the readers to question the validity of the initial assertion, much less to ask how it was arrived at. They just want to know the "rule" and how to apply it."

I don't know if the alleged deficiencies of students necessitate easier texts. I also don't know if students today would have a harder time with a demanding text than they did twenty years ago with Broom and Selenick or forty years ago with Park and Burgess. I <u>do</u> know that giving students challenging or demanding material will require instructors to spend additional time with students

explaining the material, providing additional reading assignments, or suggesting short projects that could be used in place of standard assignments. These are things that are expected of all good teachers, but what untenured instructor with a section of 300 students is going to do anything more than use a standard text and give objective exams.

The final source of influence producing lower quality texts is the author. Even with dedication and a first-rate idea for an innovative, quality text, authors are only human. The pressure of producing a final manuscript on time (so that it fits the adoption cycle, otherwise a whole year will be lost) will often lead authors to go for the "easy" material, or follow the other texts, rather than try to reconceptualize an area as originally planned.

Other compromises follow the critical reactions to the first draft of the manuscript from five to six reviewers who are generally teachers of the introductory course (and potential adopters). The most difficult thing for authors to deal with in these critical reviews are comments about the readability, interest level, boredom potential, or complexity of the material. Such critical remarks are often linked with laudatory comments like: "The author obviously is an expert in this area but the students will never follow the material" or "this material was probably drawn from an exceptional set of lectures in an upper division course but the author has not thought through its relevance for beginning students."

So what we have is an ego-involved author, trying to meet a deadline or lose a year in publication of the book, faced with comments that the material is difficult, boring, etc. What is the author to do? More than we would like to admit, we take a look at the top three texts to see how the same subject was handled. This results in an effort to salvage much of the original material by developing a new chapter outline with shorter sections for the

original material and new add-on sections to increase student interest. The result is what you might expect. An inadequately conceptualized and executed chapter that will now be both incoherent as to its central purpose and uninteresting. If this happens in only one or two chapters, the book may still be a good one. If it happens in too many chapters, the final product will look like it was written by a committee.

What is to be done?

The main thing that needs to be done is to encourage the writing of many different types of textbooks. They should be suited to the strengths and interests of students in particular schools or types of schools. Some may be designed especially for mass lectures, some for junior colleges, some for courses that enroll many students from science or engineering. The point is to encourage experimentation in format, material included, and approach, and to try and understand what works and why it works.

How is this to be done? Personally, I would not expect commercial publishers to take the lead in this effort, but they might follow. Books should be produced by authors and their departments without the usual profit component. For example, suppose a department has 500 students a year in the introductory course. Faculty responsible for the course would write a text, receiving a reduced teaching load and/or summer support. The book could be produced with camera-ready typescript (and the ever present word processors) and "bound" with the soft copy techniques of many monographs.

These textbooks would be sold to students with proceeds used to cover costs of production and author costs. Surplus revenue from sales over several years could be used for further support of authors in summer for revisions or could go to an appropriate student program, faculty research, or scholarship fund in the department. If after a few years of successful use of the text a

commercial publisher were to express interest in obtaining the book and marketing it nationally, an appropriate contractual arrangement would have to be worked out to benefit the authors and the faculty and student-oriented programs originally involved. Of course, the return to a profit nexus for the textbook opens up some of the same old problems, but the relationship between the publisher and author will be different, and students and faculty will share in the commercial side of the venture.

In any event, the main objective will have been achieved: To bring students innovative books (hopefully of higher quality than existing texts) written by people who teach the courses and who are in the best position to know what does and does not work in the classroom. The cost of failure is small, given what we have been requiring our students to read in the last twenty years.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The only exception of which I am aware is Sherman and Wood (1979) which consistently contrasts competing theoretical perspectives throughout the text.

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